

Religious Movies on the Move

The Jakarta Post, Selasa, 19 Agustus 2008

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The success of the film *Ayat Ayat Cinta* (The Verses of Love), which attracted no less than three million moviegoers within two months of its release this year, has stimulated other movies in the religious genre to come to the fore. Now, religious movies are making a big splash on the market.

Having been presented with films such as *Kun Faya Kuun* (Be and Then to Be) and *Mengaku Rasul* (Confessing as a Prophet), people are soon to be shown two other movies in the religious genre, *Syahadat Cinta* (The Profession of Love) and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* (When Love is Chanting).

The boom in religious movies cannot be separated from the rising phenomenon of the popularity of Islamic books. This is because most religious movies on the market are developed from the plot, characters and subject matter presented in popular Islamic novels. More importantly, those religious movies are given the same titles as the novels they are based on.

The marketability of popular Islamic novels seems to have guaranteed the salability of the religious movies that adopt their plot, characters and subject matter. A similar title to the novel is necessary, therefore, for marketing religious movies.

The film *Ayat Ayat Cinta*, for example, was adapted from a novel with the same title written by Habiburrahman El Shirazy. The same thing happened with *Syahadat Cinta* and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih*. The former was adapted from an Islamic novel with the same title written by Taufiqurrahman Al Azizy, and the latter from an Islamic novel by Habiburrahman El Shirazy.

The question is, why are popular expressions of Islam, in both print and non-print media, as represented by such religious movies among other things, on the rise? More importantly, why are people eagerly responding to popular expressions of Islam as such?

The fall of Soeharto stimulated the liberation of the public sphere along with the deliverance of a new mediascape. This stimulation then gave rise, in particular, to the position of Islamic expressions changing to become more central to social life.

At this point, the recent rising trend of the Islamic novel as a popular Islamic publication does not appear except as a result of the increasing move in Islamic literature from, borrowing the words of Amrih Widodo (Writing for God, 2008), "a

marginalized into a mainstream and defining genre". Religious movies are reaping the benefits of this change. And that is why, as a commercial activity, they are on the rise.

An increase in economic income is certainly a factor that leads to increasing public consumption. The more digestible, didactic and practical versions of Islamic teachings presented within, and conveyed as the content of, popular publications, print and non-print, contribute a lot to the marketability of popular expressions of Islam.

The public demand for works containing Islamic teachings that are inspiring rather than doctrinal adds another factor to the increasing trend of popular Islamic publications, including religious movies.

People have been getting bored with Islamic teachings focusing on, and preaching about, too many dos and too many don'ts. There is, rather, a popular demand for less indoctrinating content of Islamic teachings but full of handy, practical guidelines.

Characteristics such as "being based on personal experience", "inspiring" and "factual through examples" represent the key elements, therefore, for the increasingly marketable materials of Islamic teachings that people currently prefer.

This popular demand for Islamic materials thus characterized is evident in the popularity of *Ayat Ayat Cinta* among all age groups. Those who went to see the movie were not only adults, but also children and teenagers.

The film's viewers seem to have been attracted to the way religious movies present Islamic teachings using the characters and story of movie drama. People may consider religious movies as a new development of Islamic transmission through audiovisual media in Indonesia. They may perceive the long chain of Islamic transmission through preaching or sermons of being too monotonous and doctrinal.

In comparison, the transmission of Islamic teachings through movies potentially paves the much easier and more digestible way for people to sensibly consume those teachings. Presenting Islamic values on various matters, including and in particular male-female relationships, by means of practical examples with little indoctrination contributes to the internalization of those values.

As a result, the idea that the religious movies are so inspiring becomes a common perception. This way of transmission encourages moviegoers to learn more about Islam, because it leads them to be able to discern the Islamic teachings in a more digestible way but with a deeper impression and a longer-lasting memory than too-many-dos-too-many-don'ts styles so widely available in the preaching market.

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